Boggy's Buddies

Ball Python

Care Guide for New Owners

Ball Python | Reptile | Beginner-Friendly | 20 to 30 Year Lifespan

Quick Facts at a Glance

Species	Python regius
Lifespan	20 to 30 years; some reach 40 with excellent care
Adult Size	Females: 3 to 5 feet. Males: 2 to 3.5 feet
Activity Cycle	Crepuscular to nocturnal; most active at dusk and into the night
Temperament	Generally docile and tolerant; one of the most handleable snake species
Enclosure	Adult minimum 4x2x2 ft; hatchlings can start smaller
Warm Side Temp	88 to 92 degrees F surface temperature on the warm side
Cool Side Temp	76 to 80 degrees F ambient on the cool side
Humidity	60 to 80 percent; bump toward 80 during shedding
Diet	Whole prey only: appropriately sized mice and rats
Feeding Freq.	Hatchlings every 5 to 7 days. Adults every 10 to 14 days
Legal Status	Legal in Wisconsin statewide; verify local city and county ordinances

Meet the Ball Python

Ball pythons are one of the most popular pet snakes in the world, and for very good reason. They are calm, manageable in size, strikingly beautiful across an enormous range of color and pattern morphs, and when kept correctly they are genuinely rewarding long-term companions. A well-kept, well-socialized ball python is a gentle, curious animal that many owners describe as one of their most enjoyable pets.

They are also a commitment that many people underestimate. Ball pythons routinely live 20 to 30 years. They have specific temperature and humidity requirements that require real equipment and real monitoring. They are infamous for going on extended feeding strikes that can last weeks or even months. And they are entirely dependent on you to create the correct environment, because unlike a mammal, they cannot communicate distress until they are already in serious trouble.

This guide covers everything you need to set a ball python up correctly from day one and understand what to expect through their long, healthy life.

Legal Considerations

Ball pythons are legal to own in the state of Wisconsin without a permit. However, Wisconsin state law does not override local municipal and county ordinances, and some cities and counties have their own restrictions on reptile ownership. Before bringing a ball python home, verify that your specific city or municipality does not have restrictions in place.

If you rent your home, your lease may also prohibit exotic animals or require landlord approval. Always check your lease agreement before acquiring any reptile. A snake discovered by a landlord who did not approve the animal can result in being required to rehome it, which is stressful for both you and the snake.

Interstate Travel

If you ever need to transport your ball python across state lines, be aware that some states have restrictions on importing certain reptile species. Ball pythons are not federally restricted in the United States, but individual state laws vary. Always research destination state laws before traveling with your snake.

Where They Come From

Ball pythons are native to sub-Saharan West and Central Africa, with their range spanning countries including Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They inhabit grasslands, savannas, open forests, and the edges of agricultural areas. In the wild, ball pythons are terrestrial and semi-fossorial, meaning they spend much of their time on the ground and in burrows, termite mounds, and root systems.

They are ambush predators who hunt by sitting and waiting rather than actively pursuing prey. Wild ball pythons experience seasonal variation in temperature and humidity tied to wet and dry seasons, which helps explain some captive behaviors, including the tendency of many ball pythons to reduce or stop eating during certain months of the year.

Where the Name Comes From

When threatened, ball pythons curl tightly into a ball with their head tucked in the center, using their coils as a shield. This defensive posture gives them their common name in North America. In the United Kingdom and Europe they are called royal pythons, a nod to their calm and dignified temperament. Both names refer to the same animal.

The overwhelming majority of ball pythons in the pet trade today are captive bred, which is a genuinely positive development. Wild-caught ball pythons were imported in large numbers through the 1990s and early 2000s, and wild-caught animals typically arrive stressed, heavily parasitized, and difficult to establish in captivity. Always choose a captive-bred ball python from a reputable breeder or rescue whenever possible.

Enclosure and Housing

Getting the enclosure right is the single most important part of ball python ownership. More ball pythons suffer from incorrect husbandry than from any other cause. The good news is that the requirements are well understood and achievable with the right equipment.

Size Requirements

Ball pythons are terrestrial snakes who use floor space more than vertical height. The minimum enclosure for an adult ball python is 4 feet long by 2 feet wide by 2 feet tall. This is a true minimum. Many keepers prefer 4x4x2 or larger for adult females, who can reach 4 to 5 feet. A snake in too small an enclosure cannot thermoregulate properly, cannot exercise, and typically becomes chronically stressed.

Hatchlings do not need an adult-sized enclosure from the start. A very young ball python in a large enclosure can feel exposed and insecure and may refuse to eat as a result. Starting hatchlings in a smaller enclosure and sizing up as the snake grows is a practical and effective approach. A good rule of thumb is that the enclosure should be roughly as long as the snake, or slightly longer.

Enclosure Types

PVC or ABS Plastic Enclosures

PVC and ABS enclosures are considered the best option for ball pythons by the majority of experienced keepers. They retain heat and humidity extremely well, are lightweight compared to glass, are easy to clean, and come in a wide range of sizes. Front-opening doors make access easier and less stressful for the snake. The main drawback is upfront cost.

Sealed Wood Enclosures

Wooden enclosures retain heat and humidity well and can be custom built or purchased. All interior surfaces must be sealed thoroughly to prevent moisture absorption, warping, and bacterial growth. Unsealed wood in a humid environment deteriorates quickly and becomes a source of bacteria and mold. Properly sealed, wood enclosures are a cost-effective and attractive option.

Glass Terrariums

Glass terrariums are widely available but challenging for ball python husbandry. Glass loses heat rapidly and retains humidity poorly. Maintaining correct humidity in a glass enclosure typically requires covering most of the screen top to restrict airflow, which requires constant adjustment. Glass enclosures can be made to work but require more effort than PVC or wood.

Plastic Tubs and Rack Systems

Plastic storage tubs used in rack systems are the most common housing method used by professional breeders. They are inexpensive, retain heat and humidity very well, and are highly space-efficient. The main limitation is visibility. Tubs are functional but not display-oriented. For owners who want to observe and appreciate their snake daily, a front-opening enclosure with clear panels is usually

preferable.

One Snake Per Enclosure, Always

Never house two ball pythons together. Ball pythons are solitary animals and do not benefit from companionship the way social mammals do. Housing them together creates competition for resources, stress, increased disease transmission risk, and occasionally predatory behavior where one snake attempts to consume the other. Every ball python needs its own dedicated enclosure.

Temperature and the Thermal Gradient

Temperature is one of the two most critical parameters in ball python care, and understanding why it matters will help you set things up correctly from the beginning. Ball pythons, like all reptiles, are ectothermic. They cannot generate their own body heat the way mammals do. Instead, they regulate their internal temperature entirely by moving between warmer and cooler areas of their environment. This behavior is called thermoregulation and it drives virtually every biological process in their body, including digestion, immune function, and metabolism.

A snake that cannot thermoregulate properly cannot digest food, cannot fight off infection, and cannot function normally. This is why temperatures matter so much, and why checking only ambient room temperature is not sufficient. You need to know the actual surface temperatures available inside the enclosure.

Target Temperatures

What to Aim For

- Warm side surface (basking area): 88 to 92 degrees F
- Warm side ambient air: 80 to 85 degrees F
- Cool side ambient air: 76 to 80 degrees F
- Overnight minimum: no lower than 72 degrees F

Hard Limits

- Warm spot must never exceed 95 degrees F
- Cool side must never drop below 72 degrees F
- The snake must always be able to access both ends freely
- Verify with a temperature gun, not a stick-on dial thermometer

How to Measure Temperature Correctly

The most important tool for temperature monitoring is an infrared temperature gun, also called a temp gun or laser thermometer. These cost under 20 dollars and allow you to instantly read the surface temperature of any spot in the enclosure by pointing and clicking. This is how you verify that your warm side surface is actually hitting 88 to 92 degrees F, which is what your snake needs to digest food and function properly.

Stick-on dial thermometers and basic digital thermometers that measure only ambient air are not adequate on their own. They cannot tell you what the surface temperature is where the snake is actually resting, which is what matters most. Use a temperature gun for surface readings and a digital thermometer with a probe for ambient air monitoring. Ideally monitor both the warm and cool sides.

Heating Equipment

Under Tank Heaters (UTH)

Under tank heaters are placed beneath the enclosure to warm the substrate from below. Ball pythons in the wild absorb heat from sun-warmed ground, so belly heat is natural and appropriate. UTHs must always be connected to a thermostat. An unregulated UTH can reach temperatures that cause severe thermal burns, which are dangerous and can go unnoticed because snakes do not always

immediately react to overheating the way mammals do. A thermostat is not optional.

Deep Heat Projectors (DHP)

Deep heat projectors are a newer and increasingly popular technology. They emit infrared radiation that penetrates deeper into the body than surface heat alone, more closely mimicking the way solar radiation heats animals in the wild. DHPs are mounted inside the enclosure above the warm side. They must be connected to a thermostat. Many experienced keepers now prefer DHPs as the primary heat source for ball pythons.

Ceramic Heat Emitters (CHE)

Ceramic heat emitters produce heat without visible light and are a good option for supplemental ambient warmth, especially for maintaining nighttime temperatures when other heat sources are reduced. Like all heat sources, they must be connected to a thermostat. CHEs do not provide the infrared radiation benefits of DHPs, so they work best as secondary or supplemental heat sources.

Thermostats: Required for Every Heat Source

A thermostat regulates the output of your heating equipment to maintain a target temperature, turning the heat source on when temperatures drop and off when the target is reached. Without a thermostat, heating elements run at full power continuously, which creates dangerously hot surfaces and causes thermal burns. Every single heat source in a ball python enclosure must be on a thermostat before the snake goes in.

There are three types of reptile thermostats. On/off thermostats are the most basic and least expensive, simply switching the heat source on and off as needed. Pulse proportional thermostats regulate output more precisely and work very well with UTHs and CHEs. Dimming thermostats are the most sophisticated and are ideal for radiant heat sources like DHPs and incandescent bulbs. For most beginner setups, a quality on/off or pulse proportional thermostat is perfectly adequate.

What Not to Use for Heat

Heat rocks: Unregulated and notorious for causing severe thermal burns. Never use them.

Any heat source without a thermostat: Runs at full power and creates surfaces hot enough to burn the snake.

Colored basking bulbs without temperature monitoring: Surface temperatures under these can far exceed safe limits.

Hot hands, heating pads designed for humans, or space heaters: Not designed for precise reptile enclosure temperature control.

Humidity

Humidity is the second most critical parameter in ball python care and the one most commonly gotten wrong, particularly in glass enclosures. Ball pythons require ambient humidity between 60 and 80 percent. This range supports healthy respiratory function, proper shed cycles, and overall skin health. Humidity that is consistently too low causes incomplete sheds, retained eye caps, and eventually respiratory infections. Humidity that is too high combined with poor ventilation creates conditions for scale rot, bacterial infections, and respiratory disease.

How to Measure Humidity

Use a digital hygrometer with a probe. Analog dial hygrometers are notoriously inaccurate and should not be relied on. A digital hygrometer is inexpensive and will give you a reliable reading. Place the probe on the cool side for a general enclosure reading, and monitor the warm side separately if possible since humidity can vary across the gradient.

How to Maintain Correct Humidity

The substrate you choose is the primary driver of humidity. Substrates that hold moisture and release it slowly are ideal. Cypress mulch, coconut fiber, and a mixture of both are the most widely recommended options. Both retain moisture well, dry out slowly, and resist molding when maintained correctly. Lightly misting one side of the enclosure every one to two days is usually sufficient in a well-sealed enclosure. In dry climates or during winter when indoor heating dries the air, more frequent misting or the addition of a humid hide may be necessary.

The Humid Hide

A humid hide is one of the most useful tools in a ball python setup. It is a hide box containing a layer of damp sphagnum moss, giving the snake a localized area of high humidity to retreat to whenever they need it, particularly during shedding. Place the humid hide on the warm side so the snake gets both heat and humidity together. Check the moss regularly and remoisten when it dries out. Replace the moss entirely every few weeks.

Recognizing and Handling a Shed Cycle

In the days before a shed, your ball python's eyes will turn a milky blue or grey color as fluid accumulates between the old and new eye caps. The skin may also appear dull and less vibrant than usual. This is called being in blue or going opaque, and it signals that a shed is coming, usually within 7 to 14 days. During this period, increase ambient humidity toward the higher end of the range and ensure the humid hide is well-stocked with moist sphagnum moss. Do not handle the snake once you notice the blue phase. Their vision is significantly reduced and they are more likely to be defensive.

What a Good Shed Looks Like

A healthy ball python should shed in one complete, unbroken piece that looks like a perfect inside-out version of the snake, including both eye caps. If the shed comes out in multiple pieces or the eye caps appear to be missing from the shed (meaning they stayed on the snake), humidity was too low. Check the snake carefully for retained shed around the eyes, tail tip, and between scale rows. Retained shed constricts circulation and must be addressed promptly.

Substrate

Substrate lines the floor of the enclosure and serves multiple functions: it holds humidity, provides a surface for comfortable movement, gives the snake material to partially burrow into, and contributes to overall enclosure hygiene. The right substrate makes humidity maintenance much easier and contributes meaningfully to the snake's wellbeing.

Cypress Mulch

Cypress mulch is one of the most widely recommended substrates for ball pythons. It holds humidity very well, has natural antifungal properties, does not mold as quickly as many other substrates, and is comfortable for the snake to rest on and burrow into. Use 100 percent pure cypress mulch with no added dyes, fertilizers, or pesticide treatments. Provide at least 2 to 3 inches of depth.

Coconut Fiber (Coco Coir)

Coconut fiber is made from coconut husks and is an excellent humidity-retaining substrate. It is soft, natural, and cost-effective since it comes in compressed bricks that expand when water is added. Many keepers mix it with cypress mulch for a substrate that holds moisture and structural integrity well together.

Bioactive Substrate

A bioactive enclosure uses a living substrate layer populated with microfauna like isopods and springtails that naturally break down waste and shed skin. Bioactive setups require more planning and initial investment but significantly reduce cleaning frequency once established. They are a wonderful long-term option but better suited to intermediate or experienced keepers rather than a first setup.

Substrates to Avoid

Cedar shavings: Aromatic oils are toxic to reptiles and cause respiratory damage and organ failure.

Raw pine shavings: Similar concerns to cedar.

Calcium sand or colored reptile sand: Ingestion causes life-threatening intestinal impaction.

Reptile carpet: Bacteria accumulate in the fibers, it does not hold humidity, and toenails catch in the loops.

Newspaper or paper towels as a permanent substrate: Acceptable for quarantine or medical situations only. Does not hold humidity and provides no enrichment.

Gravel or rough rock as a primary surface: Hard, unnatural, and disrupts thermoregulation from below.

Hides, Furnishings, and Enrichment

Ball pythons are secretive, shy animals who feel safest when they have an enclosed, snug space to retreat to. Providing the right hides is one of the most impactful things you can do for a ball python's stress levels and overall health.

Two Hides Are Non-Negotiable

Every ball python enclosure must have at least two hides: one on the warm side and one on the cool side. Without hides on both ends, the snake is forced to choose between feeling secure and being at the correct temperature, which is a constant and genuine source of stress. Both hides should be snug enough that the snake fills them when curled inside. A hide that is too large does not provide the security the snake is looking for. When in doubt, size down rather than up.

Hide materials can include commercial plastic hides, cork bark flats, cork bark rounds, half-logs, or even simple plastic containers with a hole cut in the side. What matters is darkness, a single tight entrance, and appropriate sizing for your snake.

Water Dish

A heavy ceramic or sturdy plastic water dish large enough for the snake to soak in should be on the cool side of the enclosure at all times. Ball pythons soak periodically, especially before sheds or when humidity is low. The dish needs to be heavy enough that the snake cannot tip it over easily, as a spilled water dish rapidly over-humidifies the substrate and creates conditions for scale rot. Change and refill the water every two to three days, or immediately if soiled.

Additional Enrichment

Beyond hides and water, additional decor gives the snake more choices and a more stimulating environment. Cork bark pieces, hollow logs, sturdy artificial plants, and low climbing branches all add surface area to explore. Ball pythons are not obligate climbers but many will use low branches and logs and are more active and confident in an enriched environment than a bare one. A more complex enclosure generally produces a calmer, more outgoing snake.

Feeding and Nutrition

Ball pythons are obligate carnivores who eat whole prey. Their entire nutritional requirement is met by consuming appropriately sized whole rodents, which provide protein, fat, calcium from bones, vitamins from organs, and everything else the snake needs. They do not eat fruits, vegetables, or any plant matter.

Prey Sizing

The prey item should be approximately the same width as the widest part of the snake's body, sometimes described as leaving a slight bulge after swallowing. Prey that is too small provides insufficient nutrition. Prey that is significantly too large causes regurgitation and stress. As your ball python grows, prey size progresses from pinky mice for very young hatchlings, through fuzzies, hoppers, and adult mice, and eventually to small, medium, and large rats for adults. Most adult ball pythons are fed rats, as rats are more nutritionally dense than mice and more appropriately sized.

Feeding Frequency

Hatchlings and juveniles under one year should be fed every 5 to 7 days. Sub-adults between one and three years can be fed every 7 to 10 days. Adults over three years should be fed every 10 to 14 days. Ball pythons have slow metabolisms and do not need to eat as frequently as mammalian pets. Overfeeding leads to obesity, which stresses internal organs and shortens lifespan. An obese ball python has a visibly rounded triangular cross-section and a spine that is buried under fat rather than gently palpable.

Live, Frozen/Thawed, and Pre-Killed Prey

There are three main approaches to feeding ball pythons, and experienced keepers have strong and genuinely differing opinions on all three. Here is an honest overview of each so you can make an informed decision for your situation and your snake.

Frozen/Thawed (F/T)

Frozen/thawed prey has been humanely killed, frozen, and then thawed before being offered to the snake. It is the most widely recommended method in the captive reptile community for several reasons: it eliminates the risk of the prey injuring the snake during feeding, it is convenient and can be bought in bulk and stored in a freezer, it removes the animal welfare concern of live feeding, and it is widely available from reptile suppliers. Thaw prey by placing it in a sealed bag and submerging it in warm water for 30 to 60 minutes until completely thawed and warmed through. Never use a microwave, as this causes uneven heating and can rupture internal organs.

The main challenge with frozen/thawed is that some ball pythons, particularly wild-caught individuals or those started on live prey, refuse it initially and require patient conversion. Techniques for encouraging acceptance include scenting the prey by rubbing it with a live mouse, offering the prey in a dark paper bag to simulate a burrow, and offering late at night when the snake is naturally most active.

Pre-Killed (Fresh)

Pre-killed prey is dispatched immediately before feeding and offered fresh and warm. It retains the full natural scent, temperature, and texture of live prey without the injury risk that comes with an animal that can fight back. Pre-killed prey is often more readily accepted by picky feeders than frozen/thawed, while still eliminating the safety concern of live feeding. The main disadvantages are that it requires sourcing live prey, humanely dispatching it yourself before each feeding, and it cannot be stored in advance the way frozen prey can.

Live Prey

Live feeding means offering a living rodent to the snake. Some ball pythons, particularly those that have always been fed live, will only reliably accept live prey, and there are experienced keepers who feed live successfully and intentionally. The advantages include a strong natural feeding stimulus and reliable acceptance from reluctant feeders.

The risks of live feeding are real and should be taken seriously. A live rodent, especially an adult rat, will bite and scratch in self-defense. Bites from live prey cause wounds, eye injuries, and infections. A snake that is not hungry will ignore the prey, at which point the rodent must be removed immediately. Never leave a live prey animal alone with a snake unsupervised for any length of time. Even a small mouse can cause serious injury to a snake given enough time and opportunity.

On Choosing a Feeding Method

All three methods have been used successfully by experienced keepers for decades, and all three can result in healthy, well-fed snakes. There is no single universally correct answer. What matters most is that your snake is eating regularly, at an appropriate prey size, on a consistent schedule. If a snake was already established on one feeding method before coming to you, starting with that method and transitioning gradually if desired is usually the smoothest approach.

How to Feed

Always use feeding tongs rather than bare hands to present prey to the snake, regardless of how tame the snake is. Tongs keep your hand at a safe distance and prevent the snake from accidentally striking toward fingers that smell like prey. After feeding, give the snake 48 to 72 hours of undisturbed rest before handling. Disturbing digestion too soon causes regurgitation, which is stressful and results in loss of the meal's nutrition. You may notice a visible lump in the snake's midsection in the first day or two after eating. This is completely normal.

Feeding Strikes: When Your Snake Stops Eating

Feeding refusals are one of the most common and most stressful experiences for new ball python owners, and it is worth dedicating real space to this topic because how you respond matters.

Ball pythons in the wild eat less or stop eating during certain seasons, particularly the cooler and drier months. Many captive ball pythons retain this instinct and go through a period of reduced appetite or complete food refusal between roughly October and February. A healthy adult ball python can safely go several months without eating, though this is not something to take lightly.

Common Reasons for Refusal

- Seasonal breeding season response, particularly in males between October and February
- Being in shed or approaching a shed (eyes going blue, dull skin)
- Stress from a recent move, enclosure change, or handling too close to feeding time
- Temperatures or humidity outside the correct range
- Prey item being the wrong size
- New enclosure the snake is not yet settled into
- Simply being a ball python, who can be genuinely stubborn for reasons that are not always apparent

What to Do

First, verify that all husbandry is correct: temperatures, humidity, two snug hides, and enclosure security. A snake that feels exposed or is too cold will not eat. If everything checks out, reduce handling frequency to zero and give the snake complete quiet for one to two weeks before trying again. Offer prey late at night. Try a slightly different prey size. If you have been feeding frozen/thawed, try pre-killed. If a ball python goes more than 8 to 12 weeks without eating and is losing visible body condition, or if the neck appears thin or the spine becomes visible, a vet visit is warranted.

Handling and Interaction

Ball pythons are one of the most handleable snake species available. Most well-kept, well-socialized ball pythons are calm and tolerant during handling, resting quietly while being held and exploring their environment with genuine curiosity. Building that level of comfort takes time and consistent positive interaction.

The Two-Week Settling Rule

When you first bring a ball python home, give them a full two weeks of complete quiet before beginning handling. Regardless of how tame they appeared at their previous home, the stress of transport and a brand new environment is significant. During this time, make sure the enclosure is set up correctly and offer food after the first week, but otherwise leave the snake alone to settle in and establish their sense of security.

How to Pick Up a Ball Python

Always approach from the side, not from directly above. An approach from above mimics a predator and triggers a defensive response. Move slowly and deliberately. Slide your hand under the snake's midsection and lift smoothly, supporting as much of the body as possible. A snake that feels supported and balanced is a calm snake. Let the snake move through your hands freely, passing from one hand to the other as they explore. Do not grip or restrain. If the snake moves toward your face, redirect them by shifting which hand they move onto.

Handling Frequency and Duration

After the initial two-week settling period, begin handling two to three times per week for 15 to 20 minutes per session. This is enough to build trust and maintain tameness without overloading the snake. As the snake becomes more comfortable, sessions can be gradually extended. Most ball pythons become noticeably more relaxed with handling over weeks and months.

When Not to Handle

Within 48 to 72 hours after feeding: causes regurgitation and loss of the meal.

When the snake is in blue (pre-shed): reduced vision makes them more defensive.

When the snake is showing warning signs: hissing, pulling the head back into an S-curve, or rapid tongue flicking.

During the initial two-week settling period after bringing them home.

When your hands smell like prey animals: wash thoroughly before handling.

Common Health Issues

Ball pythons are robust animals when husbandry is correct. The vast majority of health problems seen in captive ball pythons trace back to incorrect temperatures, incorrect humidity, or inadequate hides. Getting the setup right prevents most issues before they start. Annual checkups with an exotic vet who regularly sees reptiles are strongly recommended.

Respiratory Infections

One of the most common health issues in ball pythons, almost always linked to husbandry problems: temperatures too low, humidity too high with poor ventilation, or drafty conditions. Signs include wheezing or crackling sounds when breathing, mucus in or around the mouth, bubbling from the nostrils, open-mouth breathing, and lethargy. A ball python breathing with its mouth open is in serious distress and needs a vet the same day. Respiratory infections require veterinary antibiotics and correction of the underlying husbandry problem that triggered the infection.

Retained Shed (Dysecdysis)

Incomplete shedding where pieces of old skin remain attached, most commonly around the eyes (retained eye caps), the tail tip, and between scales. Caused by insufficient humidity during the shed. Retained eye caps are the most serious concern, as they cause vision impairment and, if retained through multiple shed cycles, permanent eye damage. Do not attempt to remove retained eye caps yourself. A warm soak in shallow lukewarm water for 20 to 30 minutes can help loosen retained shed on the body. Retained eye caps require a vet visit.

Scale Rot (Necrotic Dermatitis)

A bacterial and fungal infection of the scales, caused by a combination of excessive humidity, poor ventilation, soiled substrate, or prolonged contact with a wet surface. Signs include discolored (brown, red, or black), soft, or blistered scales, usually beginning on the belly. Mild cases respond to enclosure correction and antiseptic treatment. Moderate to severe scale rot requires veterinary antibiotics. Prevention through appropriate humidity management and regular spot-cleaning is far easier than treatment.

Mites

Reptile mites are tiny parasites that feed on the blood of snakes. They are common in reptiles from pet stores and can spread between enclosures. Signs include tiny dark moving specks on the snake or in the water dish, the snake soaking excessively, visible irritation and restlessness, and in heavy infestations, lethargy and weight loss. Mites require treatment of the snake and complete disinfection of the enclosure and all accessories. Consult a reptile-experienced vet for safe and appropriate treatment options, as some products sold for reptile mites are harmful to snakes.

Inclusion Body Disease (IBD)

A serious and fatal viral disease caused by arenaviruses, primarily affecting boid snakes including ball pythons. IBD is contagious between snakes and has no cure. Signs include neurological symptoms such as stargazing (the snake holding its head upward in an unnatural, rigid posture), inability to right itself when placed on its back, regurgitation, and progressive deterioration. Any snake showing neurological symptoms must be immediately isolated from all other reptiles and seen by a vet. IBD is one of the strongest reasons to quarantine all new snakes for a minimum of 90 days before housing them near other reptiles.

Regurgitation

The expulsion of a partially or fully undigested prey item, usually within 48 to 72 hours of feeding. Common causes include handling too soon after eating, prey that was too large, temperatures too low to support digestion, or stress. After a regurgitation event, wait at least 10 to 14 days before offering a smaller prey item. Do not handle the snake during this recovery period. Repeated regurgitation that is not explained by a clear husbandry issue warrants a vet visit to rule out infection or internal parasites.

Mouth Rot (Infectious Stomatitis)

A bacterial infection of the mouth tissues, often triggered by stress, injury, or incorrect husbandry. Signs include swelling around the mouth, a cheesy or cottage-cheese-like discharge inside the mouth, redness of the gum tissue, and the snake rubbing its snout against enclosure surfaces. Requires veterinary treatment. Caught early, mouth rot has a good outcome. Advanced cases can spread to bone and become significantly more difficult to treat.

Obesity

Overfeeding is a genuine and common problem in captive ball pythons. An obese ball python has a clearly rounded triangular cross-section, visible fat deposits along the sides, and a spine that is buried under fat rather than gently palpable from the outside. Obesity shortens lifespan and contributes to organ failure and reproductive problems. Feed appropriately sized prey on the correct schedule and do not supplement with extra meals regardless of how interested the snake appears.

Things Every New Ball Python Owner Should Know

This is a 20 to 30 year animal.

A ball python can outlive dogs, cats, and significant chapters of your life. Think seriously about where you might be in 25 years before bringing one home. Many ball pythons end up in rescues because their owners did not fully reckon with the lifespan at the time of acquisition.

Correct husbandry prevents the majority of health problems.

Most ball python health issues stem from incorrect temperature, incorrect humidity, or inadequate hides. Invest in proper equipment, verify your setup with a temperature gun and digital hygrometer, and give your snake the correct thermal gradient from day one. You will prevent most problems before they ever start.

Every heat source needs a thermostat. No exceptions.

Unregulated heat sources cause thermal burns that can be severe and life-threatening. This is one of the most preventable causes of serious injury in reptiles. Connect every heat mat, CHE, DHP, and heat bulb to a thermostat before the snake ever enters the enclosure.

Feeding strikes are usually not emergencies.

New owners often spiral when their ball python misses a meal. In most cases, this is normal. Check your husbandry, give the snake space and quiet, and try again in a week or two. A well-bodied adult ball python is not in immediate danger from missing several consecutive meals. If the snake goes 8 to 12 weeks without eating and is losing visible body condition, then it is time to call a vet.

Two snug hides are as important as heat.

A ball python without appropriate hides on both sides of the enclosure will be chronically stressed. Chronic stress causes reduced appetite, weakened immunity, and a more defensive animal. Hides are not optional decor. They are as fundamental as the heating equipment.

Quarantine every new snake.

If you ever have more than one snake, quarantine each new arrival in a completely separate room for a minimum of 90 days before bringing them near your existing animals. Many diseases and parasites, including mites and IBD, spread easily between reptiles. Quarantine is the most effective protection you have for your existing animals.

Find a reptile-experienced exotic vet before you need one.

Most general practice vets do not see snakes, and experience levels among exotic vets vary significantly. Find a vet who specifically and regularly works with snakes before you bring your ball python home. Reptile emergencies are genuinely more stressful when you do not already have a vet relationship established.

Always choose captive-bred.

Captive-bred ball pythons are healthier, less stressed, better established as feeders, and more likely to be parasite-free than wild-caught animals. Whenever you have the option, choose captive-bred from a reputable source.

Respect the warning signs.

When a ball python pulls its head back into a tight S-curve with its neck tense and its eyes focused on you, it is preparing to strike. This is a clear communication. Back off calmly, avoid sudden movements, and end the session. Do not punish defensive behavior or force continued handling. Every animal has bad days. Respect the warning and try again another time.

Questions? We're Here!

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions, connect you with resources, and support you throughout your ball python ownership journey. Reach us at boggysbuddies@gmail.com or find us on Facebook and Instagram.